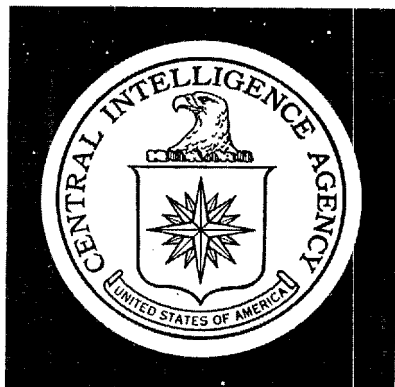


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Special Report

The Dominican Republic Prepares for Elections

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THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC PREPARES FOR ELECTIONS

The campaign for the Dominican Republic's municipal elections to be held on 16 May has gotten under way in the climate of relative political tranquility that has prevailed since the resolution of the confrontation between President Balaguer and the leftist Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) two months ago. This climate has developed despite the ominous political forces that seemed to be developing into a major challenge to Balaguer in early 1968. The President, however, has contained and even weakened potential troublemakers. His restrained firmness in resolving the UASD confrontation consolidated his support among moderates while the show of military force against the left pleased conservatives and the security forces. The municipal election campaign, however, could be upset by one of several potential developments including the adoption of an even more militant policy by the left-of-center Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), and the return of either Colonel Caamano or General Wessin.

The 16 May Municipal Elections

Most of the posts at stake on 16 May have little significance in a nation dominated by a central government that controls most local finances and many municipal services. One exception is the Santo Domingo city government, now controlled by the left-of-center Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD). The leftist city government has frequently been in conflict with Balaguer, and its patronage is one of the few sources of institutionalized political support remaining to the PRD. The unimportance of most of the posts at stake and the local rather than national character of the elections have caused President Balaguer to dismiss the bal-

loting as a "sordid scrambling for office" that is of little importance and unlikely to generate much public interest.

The tactics of the opposition, however, have somewhat enhanced the importance of the elections. Three of the principal opposition parties are abstaining, alleging that an adequate climate of security does not exist for their campaign. The parties abstaining are the PRD--the country's most important opposition party--the conservative National Civic Union, and General Wessin's right-wing Democratic Quisqueyan Party (PQD). Although there is some truth to opposition charges that the government's pervasive

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

influence and harassment by Balaguer's civilian and military partisans inhibit a fair campaign, the main motivation for the boycott is a conviction that Balaguer's Reformist Party (PR) is likely to win most of the contests. In addition, the boycott offers an opportunity to embarrass and discredit Balaguer.

It is still uncertain whether the Revolutionary Social Christian Party (PRSC) will go to the polls. The PRSC has conditioned its participation on the existence of "an adequate electoral climate" and as recently as 9 April said that such an atmosphere does not exist. Behind the PRSC's uncertainty lies its leaders' concern that a poor showing at the polls would indicate a lack of support for the party's policy of "constructive" rather than radical opposition to Balaguer and undermine the party's efforts to lay the groundwork for the 1970 presidential elections. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] minican voter has not been receptive to a party whose major appeal is ideology rather than the charisma of its leader.

The potential embarrassment of the opposition boycott will be eased by the entrance into the race of numerous independent local slates. Some of these are fronts for the abstentionist parties while others represent dissident elements in Balaguer's PR. Balaguer has already publicly pointed to the independent slates as proof that an adequate electoral climate

exists. Some of the independents, however, are under strong pressure from various political factions to abandon the race, and the number that will stay in is not clear.

Although President Balaguer has taken some steps to ensure fair elections, he has not demonstrated concern that the absence of broad electoral participation could damage the government's image in the United States and partially justify opposition charges of government repression. Balaguer has created an Electoral Guarantees Commission to investigate opposition complaints of government and military harassment. Armed Forces Minister Perez has given public assurances that military personnel who interfere with the campaign will be "severely punished." So far, however, Balaguer has failed to follow up these actions with the forceful and well-publicized implementation that would allay concern over the elections' fairness.

Given the uncertainties surrounding electoral participation, the impact of local considerations on the voters' decision and the absence of hard data on voter attitudes, the election's outcome is unclear. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The PR will be aided by its identification with Balaguer, who appears to have retained much of his popularity, particularly in rural areas which have benefited from his politically adroit public

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works program. The abstention of the PRD in its Santo Domingo stronghold has given the PR a good chance to capture the city despite its unattractive mayoralty candidate. A win in Santo Domingo may be counterbalanced by losses in several interior cities where PR rule has been tainted by allegations of misgovernment and corruption. It seems likely, however, that the PR will receive considerably fewer votes this year than in the 1966 national election when Balaguer headed the ticket. The opposition will undoubtedly trumpet this as a "repudiation" of Balaguer's rule.

Some Uncertainties

The PRD's decision to abstain has once again brought its motivations and intentions into question. The PRD's election boycott--and resulting self-denial of municipal patronage--seems likely to bring additional pressure on the party to seize power by force. Although the PRD's intransigent opposition to the President has encouraged others to conspire against him, there has heretofore been no convincing evidence that the party--or even a clique of its more radical leaders--has actively sought to topple Balaguer. Since its abstention decision, however, the PRD has been relatively quiet and this may indicate the party's uncertainty over its next move.

the return of exiled former General Wessin is likely during the coming weeks--either with or without presidential approval. Balaguer has already laid some of

the groundwork for Wessin's return by restricting contact between military figures and politicians and may permit his entry in order to avoid a confrontation with the ex-general. Wessin appears sincere in his protestations that he has no intention of plotting against Balaguer, although some of his supporters have other ideas. Wessin's supporters in the military have been effectively contained by the threat of severe discipline, and his PQD has lost the psychological momentum it obtained last year. For these reasons, it is unlikely that Wessin will pose any serious threat to Balaguer during the election campaign, although his return would be politically unsettling and promote a round of coup rumors.

The continued absence of former "constitutionalist" leader Francisco Caamano has provided an additional note of political uncertainty. The available information provides convincing evidence but not conclusive proof that Caamano is in Cuba. His intentions, however, remain a subject of speculation.

If Caamano were to "invade," there would be no more symbolic time than during the anniversary of the "constitutionalist" revolt

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that began on 24 April 1965. The security forces seem capable of containing any Cuban-backed and Caamano-led "invasion." Indeed, some of the more realistic extremists have admitted that conditions are entirely inappropriate for insurgency. Nevertheless, Caamano's return would upset the prevailing political calm and conceivably could cause the postponement of the municipal elections.

Balaguer's Strengths

In dealing with potentially unsettling political developments prior to the municipal elections, Balaguer seems likely to continue to employ the political techniques that have kept him in office longer than any administration since Trujillo. The combination of buying off some opponents while threatening others seems likely to keep the opposition divided and off balance. His efforts to placate his conservative military and civilian supporters seem likely to retain their backing--albeit at the expense of limiting presidential freedom to implement economic, social and political reforms needed to establish a groundwork for long term stability.

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